

Lewis County Agricultural Lands Study Advisory Committee
July 28, 2004
Meeting Summary

Attending: Eric Johnson, Lewis County Commissioner
Bob Johnson, Lewis County Planning
Mike McCormick, consultant to County
Ron Averill, Agriculture Technical Advisory Committee chair
Leonard Bauer, WA CTED
Betty Renkor, WA CTED

Invited but unable to attend: Wisten Aldrich, Farm Bureau; Sheila Gray, WSU Extension; Bob Amrine, Lewis County Conservation District; Donna Moir, Northwest Farm Credit Service.

Lewis County was added to the agricultural lands study following its efforts with the Legislature to amend the definition of “long-term commercial significance.” The County suggests that this term needs to be better defined by the Legislature. The intention of GMA Goal 8 also should be clarified. An Agricultural Technical Advisory Committee has begun its work to respond to the Growth Management Hearing Board’s decision that invalidates the County’s ag lands designation.

The number of agricultural operations in Lewis County has declined over the years. . There are not as many crops being harvested now as there were in 1992. However, poultry is a productive operation and can be carried out on small amounts of cropland. Christmas trees are also productive, as well as nursery operations, which are conducted in pots and use little land.

Discussion of Study items

a) Amount of land designated as agricultural land with long-term commercial significance.
The County has designated more than 54,000 acres as agricultural land. Check with Bob Johnson for his parcel by parcel calculation, which is the acreage number the County has been using. “

b) Amount of land in agricultural production, and c) Changes of amount of agricultural land since 1990.

The County representatives question the validity of the Census of Agriculture numbers and whether the farm acreage represents ownership and/or leasing. The numbers show more acres in cropland and more farms in 2002 compared with 1992, and that is contrary to testimony from the agriculture community. We should check the differences in the definitions of farms and cropland from 1992 to 2002. How much extrapolation occurs to produce the Census? Are the farms commercially significant? Census of Agriculture figures include commercial agriculture operations on Forest Reserve land (private forests), which is not designated agriculture. The Census also does not discriminate between commercially significant agriculture and smaller operations. The 2002 data shows that 60 percent of farms are 50 acres or less. We should show 1997 Census data to show patterns and information on farm size. The current use taxation numbers also may not be accurate representation of agriculture operations. Some farmland is not being farmed, and some subdivisions are taxed as current use.

d) Comparison with amounts of land in other uses.

We will meet with County GIS staff and planners to obtain these acreages and to clarify the definitions of the County's land use categories. The RDD designation provides for resource lands to be the underlying use, with residential development also allowed. The RDD designation is a central component of protecting these resources. Property owners can request an agricultural overlay in RDD-10 and RDD-20 in order to protect a farm not classified as Agriculture Class A or Class B. Also, the acreage in incorporated cities should be shown as a subset of the UGA, and the amount of tribal trust land should be clarified.

e) Designation standards and procedures.

We will meet with County planners to obtain this information.

f) Effect of designation on tax revenue.

Lands designated agriculture are likely in the current use taxation program, so their assessed value is less than market value. Commercial facilities cannot be built in agricultural designations, so there may be a lost opportunity. How is that measured? There is the potential of lost revenue, including property and sales taxes, from higher uses. These lost opportunities restrict the potential for non-farm income for farmers. Most farmers are part-time farmers and depend on non-farm income.

g) Contribution of agriculture to the local economy.

One report showed that agriculture contributed only one or two percent to the local economy. Information on this topic may be available from the local Economic Development Commission or the University of Washington.

h) Threats to maintaining the agricultural land base.

The inability to get water rights is the number one threat. Farmers lose water rights in 5 years if they do not use the water. The transfer of water rights is just underway.

Changing international markets are a threat. Regulations regarding dairy operations and control of manure are an issue, although many dairies have moved to Eastern Washington, effectively transferring their ag activities. The GMA is also perceived as a threat, because the designation of land as agriculture affects the ability to get loans. Protecting agricultural soils does not necessarily protect the ag industry.

i) Measures local government should adopt...

The state needs to adopt an agriculture policy. There is no statewide agriculture policy, except land use policies.

j) Any other type of information that will help the committees...

The County's designation of land as agriculture affects the farmers ability to borrow money. The bank views the designation as a decreased value of land because there is no possibility of other uses. Another issue for agriculture is the lack of succession. The next generation is not taking over the farm. The land can't be subdivided for family members. Older farmers had the

expectation, based on past practice, that their land was their retirement. Now the land is zoned agriculture and there are no buyers.

Transfer or purchase of development rights programs will work in urban counties with tremendous pressures for growth. In Lewis County, it's less expensive to develop land than it would be to buy a development right.